



**Digital Cultures Research Centre**  
**University of the West of England**

## **On-Line Papers – Copyright**

DCRC online papers may be cited or quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also download them for your own personal use. This paper is published under a Creative Commons license, described below. You may share this work but we would encourage you to seek the author's permission to publish the work elsewhere (e.g. to mailing lists, bulletin boards etc.).

Please note that this paper is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 license:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Under the provisions of the license, if you copy this paper you must:

- include this copyright note
- not use the paper for commercial purposes or gain in any way
- not alter, transform or build upon this work (apart from within the accepted bounds of academic convention)

Please observe the conventions of academic citation in a version of the following form:

[Author] , [Title of paper], Digital Cultures Research Centre, University of the West of England, [URL for the paper].

# TIME SLICE

**Jonathan Dovey**

*This essay is an analysis of the relationship between the emergent cultural form of the Web Drama and the Attention Economy. It argues that web native forms of interruptible content are the constituents of new narrative genres and offers an analysis of how they are the function of the monetisation of Web 2.0.*

*Attention is the process by which value is produced as inseparable from the production of subjectivity (Terranova 2010)*

## **1 In Cyberspace, no-one can hear your scream.**

Like many academic endeavours, this chapter begins in enthusiasm and ends in complexity; Its roots lie in a number of unsuccessful attempts I made to finance a web drama project through 2007/8. My enthusiasm was based on the explosion of new moving image forms afforded by the spread of online media. As a long time media activist and theorist I am particularly susceptible to the Web 2.0 rhetorics. The kind of arguments for plural public spheres that have underpinned serious Media Criticism since its inception now mutate as celebration of participation and co creation. In the Play and Display zone of culture our deep play with social media offers a sense of agency in the mediasphere. Our photos, graphics, videos, podcasts and blogs share everyday feelings, pleasures, pains, and enthusiasms; these sharings obviously create community. Our lip syncs, mash ups, swedeings, collabs, animations, parodies, and video blogs are new, shared symbolic experiences often based on acting out in the forms of mainstream media. I defy any viewer to see a selection of the best of this work and not be affected by the compelling experience of human creativity, ingenuity, joy and empowerment that they convey.

Sadly whilst this wave of video creativity was, as we will see, widely reproduced in commercial online media forms the reality of attempting to finance a production that could inhabit the digital media ecosystem as a successful professional practice was another matter altogether. I found myself undertaking a crash course in the mechanics of the attention economy. Everyone liked the pitch for our web drama concept, it worked. But it became clear that to produce it we either needed to bootstrap the project, to make it for nothing until it built an audience, or find sponsors with deep pockets who would stay with it until it found a regular 100,000 - 250.000 viewers online. The problem was finding an audience. In the olden days, getting a TV commission guaranteed an

audience. Television, as traditional media political economy argued, is a mechanism for delivering eyeballs to advertisers. The problem is that the Long Tail (Anderson 2006) of cyberspace has too much content to attract attention in numbers that are meaningful to mass media advertisers, attention is itself the premium commodity of the long tail. The competition for attention out there made the pitch harder than usual to sell. The problem can be usefully understood in terms of networks; Barabasi & Alberts 1999 paper *The Scaling of Random Networks* argues that the network is a basic principle of the organisation of all kinds of systems, human., biological and chemical. *However* because of the principle of 'preferential attachment to already connected nodes' there is every chance that a few nodes in a network will become highly connected whilst most will remain loosely or disconnected. A new node in network (eg a new Facebook page) is more than likely to link to popular users with many friends, to an already highly connected node. A few big internet trees get to grow strong in the sunlight of audience attention whilst there are a myriad of tiny organisms that remain invisible to an outside observer of the system, Barabasi argued 'the most intriguing result of our Web mapping project was the complete absence of democracy, fairness and egalitarian values on the Web. We learned that the topology of the Web prevents us from seeing anything but a mere handful of the billion documents out there.' (Barabasi 2003: 56/57).

These experiences and considerations led me into an ongoing investigation into the attention economy that underpinned the paper given to the 'Ephemeral Media' conference in Spring 2009.

## 2 Time And Attention

Any consideration of media temporality might begin with the assertion that Media have always, by their nature, been ephemeral – Radio signals pass on the airwaves, today's newspaper became tomorrow's fish and chip wrappings, cinema was a fleeting moment in the dark. The VCR and DVD were technologies pointing us toward a temporality that is now the opposite of ephemeral. Online media can be accessed repeatedly, revisited, replayed, downloaded, forwarded, recycled and mashed up. You Tube, Vimeo, and TV on demand liberate us from TV schedules and create increasingly on demand, rewatchable and reusable media – the whole principle of user generated content and its viral means of transmission are reliant not upon its ephemerality but upon its 'always-on' availability.

And yet this is not an archive in any settled stable sense of the word. If not exactly ephemeral online media are both pervasive and ambient, like a weather system – dynamic, mutable, complex, airborne. One day the internet is faster than another, items disappear or reappear somewhere else, I never follow the same hyperlinked journey twice. The internet today is a

different internet from the internet yesterday, our media co-constitute a system that is anything but stable. (See eg Elsassaer 2009 for an account of the instability of online media navigation). The perpetual innovation afforded by the operation of Moore's Law has created a permanent 'upgrade culture' in which novelty itself has intrinsic value (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 52). Upgrade culture has a kind of ephemerality built into it, where interfaces, platforms, license agreements, user profiles, tweets, favourites, likes, google rankings all change, like the weather, on an hourly basis. The speed and connectivity of the net afford many opportunities for the expression and recording of our affective engagements – hence the application of new swarm based aggregation algorithms that create the new verb to 'trend'. Google Trends and Twitter's 'Trending now' features are softwares which sieve the viral dynamics of the web to produce live attention maps. Permanently updating has given the present moment more currency than ever before.

Its not just the software systems and user profiles that are permanently upgrading. Data is becoming ubiquitous; wirelessness brings permanent connection into the day-to-day spaces of our lives, which in turn effects our experience of time. As communication becomes mobile, media becomes mobile in the sense that not only is it 'always on' and always available but always present everywhere. The Pervasive Media slogan promises to deliver 'the right media at the right time in the right place'. To do this the delivery devices will be context aware and platforms will be mobile social networks that facilitate easy exchange of all kinds of user generated content from viral video to restaurant rankings, dancefloor updates to bus timetables. We no longer catch up with media - it catches up with us.

So the temporality of online media has this quality of always on – not exactly ephemeral – but often insubstantial in an almost throwaway mode given its context of social network communication rather than broadcast. Understanding or defining these precise temporalities necessitates an understanding of the temporalities of attention. At one level the sheer amount of online media content means that we have less time for all of it – it comes at us thick and fast filtered by search engines and user recommendation rather than the relatively stable TV listings guides. In the age of media abundance perhaps it is *our attention that becomes more ephemeral* rather than the media themselves. 'Common sense' experiences of online media (see eg Carr 2010) argue that our attention *has* to be ever more fleeting as it is made the object of intensified competition. This everyday feeling has its explanation in the astonishingly simple question that lies at the heart of the 'attention as commodity' paradigm. What is it that information consumes? Attention. (Simon 1971). The more information (or media) the less attention we have for it. If we assume that attention is zero sum, that there is a limit to how much attention a given population can give, then as media events proliferate they will perforce command smaller and smaller

attention segments. This is the position from which leading web polemicist of the idea of the attention economy Michael Goldhaber begins:

'[O]urs is not truly an information economy. By definition, economics is the study of how a society uses its scarce resources. And information is not scarce - especially on the Net, where it is not only abundant, but overflowing. We are drowning in information, yet constantly increasing our generation of it. So a key question arises: Is there something else that flows through cyberspace, something that is scarce and desirable? There is. No one would put anything on the Internet without the hope of obtaining some. It's called attention. And the economy of attention - not information - is the natural economy of cyberspace' (Goldhaber 1997).

At a simple level this can be read as a restatement of the idea that a media ecosystem delivers attention to advertisers, brands and therefore to consumption. In this reading attention and time are the same. Indeed the television ratings system for pricing advertising made this assumption; if the TV was reported to be on then it was assumed that it was being attended to. If the advertisements whose income was the essential system nutrient were getting into the living room then the CPM (cost per thousand viewers) was assumed to be the same; the *quality* of attention was assumed to be neither here nor there. (Advertising cost variation on TV and elsewhere is differentiated by the class or buying power of the viewer/ consumer) The fact that as viewers were distracted, bored, doing childcare, housework or making love whilst the ad was screened made no difference to its price as long as the TV was predicted to be on.

However the increased competition for our attention and the decline of the oligopolistic control of the attention markets of mass media brought about by digital connectivity mean that we are now being forced into thinking far more about the *quality* of attention not just its quantity. Like Goldhaber, Davenport & Beck argue that we are in an era defining shift from time (as labour) as the basic economic measurement to attention, but that the two are different,

'Certainly something to which people allot a good deal of time in practice can receive minimal attention. Anyone who has been in school probably knows the feeling of sitting through a lecture for what seems like hours on end, while thinking about something totally unrelated... Conversely, a huge amount of effective attention can be given to something in a small amount of time. One blinding flash of insight or a compliment to a co-worker may not take much time, but may result in focused attention worth a whole year's worth of work ' (2001: 28).

As is often the case the vantage point of digital culture produces new archaeologies of media that have also revised the history of attention. (See e.g. Lanham 2006; which uses the classical idea of rhetoric to think about the new ways that attention is organized). Jonathan Beller has taken the 'attention as scarce commodity' paradigm and argued compellingly that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mass Media has been producing attention as a commodity since the birth of cinema and mass media advertising. In his account of the attention economy capital itself has been transformed by what he calls 'cinematization':

'In an emerging interpenetration of the economic and the visual (in which the filmstrip became the assembly line of the visible world), spectators "assembled" the image-commodities, at once valorizing the cinema and producing continuously revised versions of the world and of themselves within a matrix of industry and profit... Thus "the image" creates the techno-social modifications necessary to engineer the adaptive forms of social cooperation that have become the pre-requisites for the preservation of capital and capitalist hierarchy' (Beller 2006).

For Beller the intensification of competition for this capital producing attention is a commodification that goes way beyond the commodification of time as labour, new media 'are the viral penetration of the logistics of capital into the life-world that turns revolutionary desires (for self-realization, for survival) into the life-blood of a growing totalitarianism.' (Beller 2006)

This insight goes to to the heart of the ambivalence that critical theorists experience when confronting the vast human labour constituting the World Wide Web. On one hand it is an awesome expression of human ingenuity creativity and co operation (our 'revolutionary desires') – on the other its very exploitation of desires for self actualization and agency trap us ineluctably within capitalist value production; a trap where every ingenious innovation produces another opportunity for commodification of desire and accumulation. To fully grasp this point we must just pause for a moment and think about what we do when we are online. How do we make the choices that drive our interaction? What drives our click journeys through the web?

We used to celebrate the simple notion of 'interactivity' but all our interactions are driven by affect, by desire, by curiosity, by pleasure, by consumption, by epistephelia. When we are 'surfing' the web we spend a lot of time, like actual surfers, waiting for the wave, waiting for the series of connections that will turn the heart/brain/eye/mouse/database/router/server assemblage into a wave of discovery that gives us the surge of satisfaction at finding what we didn't know we were looking for. This realization is one of the driving ideas behind 'Web 2.0' – when Tim O'Reilly made 'Data is the new Intel inside' one of the precepts of his 2005 Web 2.0 prescription he was emphasising that for business the ability to capture data about our desire driven click journeys on

the web is a huge asset. Knowing about us through the data produced by our interaction is one of the things making Google the most powerful corporation on earth. We produce value for new media economies through the expression, attention and co-creation of our subjectivity.

What is at stake here is indicated by Tiziana Terranova when she talks about the *bios* of attention, underlining that attention is a neurophysical quality, necessary to the satisfactory development of the infant brain. Recent developments of the idea that the brain carries on being plastic subject to different stimuli for much longer than was previously thought possible underline the importance of the quality of attention we pay to the subjects that we become. However Terranova draws our attention to the variability of 'multiple and heterogeneous values' derived from attention, offering an argument against Beller's totalizing commodification,

'The production of multiple and heterogeneous values – from which economic value is derived - thus would not be defined neither by work, scarcity or the market, but by the powers of memory and by and action of as they express themselves in the social powers of association, in the circulation of flows of desires, beliefs and affects, and the ways in which, when such flows run over the social body, they are capable to bifurcate in novel productions and also to converge and hence spread, through the imitative processes of diffusion.' (Terranova 2010)

It is clear that lower barriers to entry into the media market mean an exponentially widening field of availability of media all competing with each other for the attention, and therefore the necessary capitalisation, to reach profitability. These enterprises are competing very heavily for users, so marketing and promotion are key. *These economic conditions have a direct effect upon the media form and the user experience.* The web media user constantly finds herself hailed, solicited, invited to connect. Community management has become the starting point for web marketing – web media invite the user to join, to create a profile, to post blogs or other announcements, to make links, to invite other friends and so on. This is not because media providers just want us all to play nice and have lots of warm friendships. It is because they are seeking, in a crowded, transient marketplace characterised by a nomadic audience to create *brand engagement*. For users, this means that our web media experiences are interrupted by, suffused with and sometimes nearly drown in a sea of advertising and sponsorship content. Pop-ups, banners, sponsorships, product placements, interactives and virals that pretend not to be ads are all characteristic of this media ecosystem. Our behaviour becomes data that can be sold on without our understanding and then be used to maintain consumption in whatever segment of the Long Tail our habitus is identified with.

### **3) Web Drama – designing transmedial narrative.**

I will now move on to show how the temporalities of the attention economy are producing new cultural forms by focussing on examples from Web Drama. Web Drama is one of the sites where televisual narrative form meets new practices of social networking. It is a fruitful site for investigating how TV mutates in the digital media ecosystem. In this instance we might think about how television's appeal to live-ness is being transmuted in the 'user generated' diegetic worlds afforded by webcams, mobile phone footage and home movie. We can also see the traditional segmented forms of television narrative transmuted by the new rhythms of online attention flow. Web Dramas take a serial form, appearing in short 5 – 10 minute episodes, sometimes on a regular two or three times a week schedule or more usually on a more sporadic basis. They therefore depend not on the discipline of the TV schedule to find an audience but on the 'always on' temporality of viral communication that depends on the user, to like, recommend, store and transmit. There has been a wide range of experiment and funding models. The earliest experiments were bootstrapped, produced with tiny budgets but finding audience through viral serendipity and assiduous self-promotion. The indie series made as a calling card for TV crossover followed experimenting with sponsorship and income from product placement. Finally we have seen the fully funded Fox, Disney or BBC productions running online. The emergent form of web drama has become the site of some notable experiments in digitally native popular narrative.

The form first attracted attention in 2006 with the production of *Lonely Girl 15*. *Lonely Girl 15* achieved a level of web notoriety on its launch by appearing to be the real video blog of a 'Lonely Girl' which gradually become a more and more compelling story, as Bree the main character appeared to be recording her descent into dark and cult like urban nightmare. It became a You Tube hit, gathering an active and speculative fan base. The Lonely Girl was eventually exposed as an actress by journalists and the whole project revealed as a brilliantly staged promotion by a group of aspiring filmmakers and producers. The ambiguous status of the reality of *Lonely Girl 15* is typical of web aesthetics. The web cam blog carries the feel of authenticity and one to one communication that makes a strong dramatic 'proposition' to the viewer sitting at home on their own in front of the computer screen. The question 'is this real or is it fiction' is at the heart of the Alternate Reality Gaming experiences that are an equally significant web native cultural form and which often spin off from web dramas offering engagement potential for audiences and advertisers. This promise of engagement is crucial for understanding what follows below in our analysis of the economics of attention. Posting narrative segments in the social media context of You Tube affords comment and community building. Characters can comment back in role; fans can respond, create their own forums for discussion, and get involved in solving the mystery. Attention is thus commanded way beyond the borders of the 5-minute story segment; the web



drama is 'sticky' with opportunities for more in depth engagement. The team behind *Lonely Girl* went on to produce *Kate Modern* below.

*Happy Slip*, (2006 –) is an example of a different kind of series based in home made ethnic comedy. Written, directed and performed by Christine Gambito an American Filipino actress *Happy Slip* uses a deliberately amateur low tech style in which for instance Gambito will play several roles in one episode creating humour out of the continuity cutting as she acts with herself in multiple personas. Later on the series evolved to incorporate other performers, friends and family members as she developed her own soap opera pastiche. The series' humour is based in a classic second generation migrant experience of trying to establish a life across two sets of cultural norms. Gambito has become a self made web personality, her You Tube channel has 645,000 subscribers and getting on for 80 million upload views. This successful attention gathering has created income through commercial work in promotional video campaigns as well as work for the Philippines Embassy and employment fronting a health awareness campaign. *Happy Slip* is now a comedic brand complete with merchandising virally transmitted through You Tube. Gambito's posts continue to develop her characteristic style of crossover between real life and performance, her Oct 7 2010 post features her performance of all the different styles of greeting a new born that she had encountered in the previous few months with the birth of her second son. Again her current (Oct 2010) Tumblr and You Tube sites have opportunities to comment, to get involved with other members of the *Happy Slip* world; member profiles appear like friends on a Facebook page. It is not hard to see how such a community might constitute an environment for generating sales leads for particular products that might fit with the *Happy Slip* 'cute' style.

The anonymously produced *Human Pet* (Oct 2006) was a much darker concept. A series of what look like authentic ransom videos were posted online and the audience were invited to help save the victim through their interactions. The videos showed a bound victim in a bare room; the viewers of the clips had to solve puzzles to keep the victim alive. The storyline is that Sam Deercote aka Codemaster has kidnapped Eric Taylor, Codemaster states online, "If my identity is Ever Revealed or compromised, Eric will die. This is my masterpiece, and you will play by my Rules Codemaster p.s. - Art is a mystery to be unraveled"

Again a community built up around the site speculating as to its reality status and supporting one another in the ARG type puzzling activities that would drive the plot forward. This was a very low-tech production that exploited the popular tropes of so called 'torture porn' and the grainy ransom videos posted by terrorists.

*The Guild*'s 2007 crossover hit occupies another kind of web culture – an award winning sitcom featuring the members of an online gaming guild clearly based on *World of Warcraft*, the project was self financed by Buffy actress Felicia Day after television turned it down for being too geeky. Some of the first series was funded by fan donation and then the second was picked up by Microsoft advertising who partnered the production with the Sprint phone company to deliver *The Guild* as exclusive content for the X Box Live Platform. (Exclusive in web contexts usually means a time limited exclusive release to a particular platform or network before general availability). The sponsorship thus facilitated the Sprint, Xbox and Samsung brands involved in the funding package to reach a niche target audience of young male gamers, early adopters who would respond positively to the phone company pitch. The excitement and enthusiasm generated by discovering your own community affectionately parodied on the web is clearly one of the pleasures that *The Guild* has in common with *Happy Slip* above; moreover this pleasure is enhanced by the sense of agency delivered when the user feels that they have somehow discovered the series themselves, either through viral friend recommendation or through their own serendipitous navigation. In this sense we can see the process whereby our own desires constitute us as consuming subjects; we seek out the material and volunteer ourselves to Samsung and Microsoft as particular kinds of people with particular kinds of tastes, in particular kinds of networks that can be tracked through our online behaviour.

There are numerous examples online – the selection above from the emergence of the form in 2006/7 is intended to give the general reader a sense of the range and style. (See Lander 2010 for further web links and references) These experiments have constituted a media lab where experiments in new forms of narrative and crucially new forms of monetisation are conducted. These experiments are at the cutting edge of what Television will become in the post scarcity media era; they are the contemporary archaeology of transmediality.

Here we begin to see ways that User Generated Content has created its own aesthetic; a set of stylistic tropes and social networking conventions that are drawn from the behaviours of non-professional media users. The world of UGC has become the context for new forms of web based entertainment fiction. Here for instance the wobbly-scope First Person address of the camcorder becomes the webcam confessional that has become the 'mastershot' of many web based video forms. (Vlogs were 40% of all YouTube videos 'most discussed' in Burgess & Green's sample 2009: 52) The burgeoning field of Web Drama and online '360 degree' TV spin offs have developed a new diegetic world where there has to be a reason for the camera to be present. The mark of the user, of presence and of technology, has become a precondition. The narrativisation and commodification of user generated content in these emergent forms exploits the history of

'vernacular video'. Vernacular video is demotic, promiscuous, amateur, fluid, and haptically convenient, technology at hand and in the hand. I derive the idea of vernacular video from Jean Burgess' 2007 doctoral work and subsequent work with Joshua Green on You Tube where she defines vernacular creativity as 'the wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat) practised outside the cultural value systems of either high culture or commercial creative practice'. (Burgess & Green 2009: 25) The online forms of vernacular video also develop from what I have discussed elsewhere as the 'camcorder cultures' of the 1990s (Dovey 2000:55ff) and display many of the same characteristics. The grammar of this vernacular is characterised by affect, intimacy, desire and display. Like any demotic it is mercurial, endlessly inventive, driven by the self-replicating memes of web culture. The ubiquity of the video camera in everyday life creates a fluid subject position, the video camera can simply be handed back and forth and turned on by whomever facilitating an intimacy and ease of address. This demotic visual style has immediacy and an appeal to users; it is the visual grammar of the everyday. Its potential for participation is therefore significantly higher than it might be if the work was characterised by mainstream TV or Hollywood production values. The fact that a lot of the material looks like an average You Tube post or mobile phone movie makes it a lot easier for me to comment, in my vernacular, than it would be if the material had a traditional TV or Cinematic finish. The cultural constitution of the subject through 'our vernacular' therefore becomes value-producing process whereby the demotic becomes the grammar of brand engagement. No longer does 'everyday creative practice' lie 'outside the cultural value systems of ... commercial creative practice', on the contrary it becomes a new visual grammar of consumption driven by the self constituting practices of its creators.

#### **4 Salami Slicing Attention**

We now turn to The precise methods through which the demotic creativity of the web can be monetised within the context of the attention economy. However its worth pointing out before we do so that the majority of You Tube material that falls into the category of vernacular or non professional is not produced or uploaded with the intention of making money. Patricia Lange (2007) has used the idea of 'fractal distinction between the public and private' to analyse the processes whereby our You Tube posts are cast on the water of the shifting tides of net traffic, pitched at many different possible destinations between the 'privately public' affinity group of friends and family and the 'publicly private' viral hit. Most amateur posts are aimed at an immediate social network audience of mostly known friends and family with the vague awareness that you too could go viral in the lottery of web celebrity. This chapter is more concerned with those semi professionals or aspiring producers seeking to take advantage of the lower barriers to

entry afforded by digital cultures in order to create new kinds of work and new kinds of media companies.

The problem for media companies with ambitions to professionalism starting up on the web is finding an audience – the paradox of Barabasi's principle of 'preferential attachment to already attached nodes' is made manifest as soon as you launch your site. You may have a great idea but how do you achieve the scale to find an audience – most of the ways that media producers can monetise their talent rely upon selling attention in tiny measurable units. Essentially a media company provides content for free by harvesting the potential for users to purchase a product in the future (brand engagement), by selling advertising space, by sending potential purchasers to shopping sites or by delivering the viewer via free content to a subscription service (the 'freemium' model). In order to sustain any of these income streams the media producer needs to have long pockets that afford the patient building of audiences. As we will see the audience numbers compared to broadcast 'big media' are tiny – however if your audience segment is specific, has spending power, is reliable (ie returns over time) and most important of all *measurable* then your small audience numbers may be valuable to media buyers.

The costs a producer is able to charge for the attention they deliver to brands depend on online advertising metrics. In the past advertising costs were calculated as 'cost per mill ' (CPM), a figure calculated on how many thousand people would see the advertisement. Online brings the ability to measure not only CPM but also, how long does your mouse 'hover', how long do you spend on a site, how often do you 'click through' to a product site from a sponsorship logo and how often an ad leads to purchase? Here the attention economy is salami sliced into high value layers that can be packaged up and sold to advertisers at differential rates and in a bewildering variety of packages. Advertising and sponsorship have developed myriad new forms in order to measure our attention. Cost Per Thousand has become Cost Per Action, (CPA) commanding a higher price because it implies *engagement* the holy grail of brand marketers; the user has taken an action (share, comment, like) and these actions can be aggregated into a figure that can have a financial value attached to it.

A brand's media buyers will need to know not only how many monthly visitors and viewers the web drama has, but also how often these users actually upload or participate by commenting, Tweeting, 'liking' in Facebook, and how many of these actions can be turned into monetisable actions ( purchase, subscription). Web 2.0 is built on the simple realisation that the web will record all of these actions anyway – if we ask it too. In order to facilitate this process new forms of advertising and sponsorship are being devised all the time. The spaces and connections of the network are for the social marketer just so much real estate, tiny dynamic billboards waiting to

be exploited. As a media buyer looking for advertising space online you can pay for a variety of formats each one designed for specific kinds of product or market segment, eg,

- an 'expandable hub' – a banner ad that when clicked plays a video,
- ad boxes with video already embedded,
- expandable video players with different branding boxes available,
- ads that allow the user to sign up to a Twitter stream or a Facebook group where they can discuss the product or service being advertised,
- simple over lay ads that take the user straight to a purchase point,
- overlay ads that allow you to see what other users have said about a product, ads that look like possible questions to ask about a service that then offer answers from a Twitter stream.

Many of these services seek to leverage the power of social networking to encourage consumption. In Oct 2010 Seth Goldstein's' *Social media .com* were launching a new product called 'Social Re engager' 'with the straplines

*'In the first 4 seconds, a user decides whether or not to interact with your ad.*

*More than 99% of users become DISENGAGED.*

*Get them back with the Social Re-Engager!*

*Social Re-Engager detects disengaged users, and gets them re-engaged with the power of social pressure. Get them back with the Social Re-Engager!*

*Increases clickthrough rate by up to 800%!'* (<http://blog.socialmedia.com/index.html>)

What does all this mean to the producer and to the form of web drama? Firstly that your story has to be constructed in such a way that it will appeal to particular kinds of audiences with particular kinds of buying power – in fact that is no different from any other form of commercial media production. It just so happens that the generalized field of upgrade culture produces particular kinds of young, mobile, socially networked subjects as its 'preferred technicities' (Dovey & Kennedy 2006:64). They are the idealized consumers for whom most online media producers are competing and who are allegedly leaving television in favour of the web. (According to the Internet Advertising Bureau total ad spend on the web surpassed ad spend on TV in the UK for the first time in 2009.) Secondly your chances of success will be enhanced by the more opportunities you offer your user to interact with and participate in the experience. So at the very

basic level all your characters will have their own Facebook pages, they will email, text and tweet encouraging a community to build up around the show. All of these potential sites of engagement are potential sites of attention monetization; saleable events. Thirdly your story lines should have the temporal quality of being permanently interruptible – online media exist in overlapping windows usually open at the same time all commanding slightly different attention modes. So your story world has to reflect these medium specific qualities of temporality. Then the experience of ‘expandable hubs’, media players with permanent advertising overlays or Twitter interruptions are all par for the course. Fourthly you should be prepared for your story to exist in that liminal space that is both demotic digital realism aiming for viral impact *and* sponsored fiction. In other words to set a story in the domain of the viral ad – advertisements that look like home grown demotic video but are actually agency produced. The series *My Sister Freaks Out* (2006) for instance looked like the real video diary based account of a very spoilt Californian teenager in the realm *Beverly Hills 90210* but turned out, after a short run, to be an ad for Domino’s Pizza. Finally you should be ready to accept sponsorship and product placement at all levels of the production. Sponsorship can be in the form of selling ‘branded wraparounds’ for your whole site, or selling particular parts of it to sponsors. It might also involve selling narrative space inside the story by integrating products into a storyline. Here sponsorship segues into product placement. So for instance the web drama *Where Are the Joneses* (2007) had the eye catching (but terrible) idea of having the fans write the script; the script wiki was locked each day at 4.00, shot the following day and uploaded the day after. Big engagement. Ford sponsored the series. The story starts from the proposition that Dawn Jones discovers that her Father was a sperm donor, she has lots of siblings who she decides to trace - it became a picaresque journey round Europe in, guess what? A Ford Ka.

## 5 Upgrade Buzz

Finally I want to turn to the value of the attention generated by upgrade culture that is above and around the functional mechanics of farming attention in the emergent ecosystems of online media. I want to argue that the dynamics of upgrade culture produce novelty as an apparently intrinsic value. This line of inquiry draws on more recent research I have conducted with digital media start-ups working with new narrative forms, context aware delivery systems, augmented reality and interactive public spectacles. (see eg Hazel Grian’s *Traces of Hope for the Red Cross*, PIAS Mobile’s *Plastic Beach* Augmented Reality Campaign for Gorillaz, Seeper’s Interactive Projection Mapping for *Nokia Ovi Maps*) In these cases the value of novelty was explicit – the fact that producers were offering a new format that could make a brand look ‘cutting edge’ was of more value than any metrics showing engagement or purchase intentions. If the campaign itself attracted column inches in the advertising press this was *as valuable* as a rise in

sales to the brands concerned. This is a point at which the attention economy can be seen to be ramifying itself way beyond a mere restatement of the old 'eyeballs to advertisers' principle. Here the attention of the 'attention farmers' themselves has a premium value that is actually never monetised in any conventionally comprehensible way. It's value is as 'buzz', cultural capital that becomes actual capital through the complex processes of cultural practice and hegemonic influence that Bourdieu has established but here transposed into the techno-cultural milieu of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The ideological force of the value of buzz in upgrade culture can be measured in the money spent investing in techno futures. The first dot.com bust taught us this lesson and since Web 2.0 we have been in the grip of a further manifestation of technological desire based in part on online media. Despite the intensification of attention farming described above the jury on the conventional profitability of web media is still out. You Tube was forecast to actually lose \$470m in 2009/10 – despite its wild success. (Johnson 2009) The ad revenue just doesn't balance out the high operating costs (in bandwidth and storage terms) of serving a video clip to each user. Despite this Google were prepared to pay \$1.6bn for You Tube in Oct 2006. This exemplifies the value of attention. It doesn't matter that your income stream doesn't match your costs if you can create enough press attention and buzz to attract a buyout. This is one of the real meanings of the 'attention economy' – if you can focus attention on your brand you will make money even if there is no actual cash flow. Media start up business plans are characterised by an argument that revenue will match costs at a certain point but at 5 or 10 years all investors will have exit options based on the idea that the company IP will be bought up by a much bigger player like Microsoft or Google. That's actually one of the ways the way that new web 2.0 entrepreneurs are making big money – through speculation on unproven future income – exactly as they did in the good old Web 1.0 crash.

These strands are all in play in the story of the social network Bebo and the role of the web drama *Kate Modern* in creating attention capital that became real cash. Bebo was a social network growing through 2005 – 9 to more than 5m users worldwide aimed at the teen user between children's social media (eg *Club Penguin*, *Habbo Hotel*) and Facebook. *Kate Modern* launched in July 2007 on the Bebo social network and ran as two series totalling 240 episodes.. Each episode ran as an exclusive for 24 hours on Bebo and was then made available on other networks such as Veoh and YouTube. Although the work can therefore circulate virally Bebo hopes that all those users who want to know more or to participate in the community will be driven back to the original Bebo pages.

*Kate Modern* follows the story of Kate an East London art student who's life takes a turn for the dark and mysterious when she becomes the victim of a shadowy organisation who want her 'trait positive' blood supply. The narrative follows events as her friends get drawn into the mystery plot and Kate is kidnapped and eventually found dead in the series one climax. The second series followed Charlie, Kate's best friend as the group attempt to solve the murder mystery only to discover that their group is harbouring a gruesome serial killer who is also at odds with the original suspects 'The Order'. The story is set in the *Friends* type 20 – 30 yr old social milieu that is the aspirational generation for the Bebo teen demographic.

Throughout 2007/8 Bebo were all over the press with reports of their ground breaking web drama which was the first in the UK to attract crossover attention through its innovative mix of product placement, advertising and sponsorship. *Bebo* claimed that the first series of the show attracted 30 million total views with an average of 200 000 views per episode. (See Lander 2010 *The Truth about Bebo* ) One of the ways they achieved this was by ensuring that the *Kate Modern* videos ran automatically on the Bebo Homepage. The other was to have a powerful PR operation which stressed the power of this form of web experience to deliver engagement to brands looking for that young, mobile, 'taste-forming' demographic. The audience is here a fan to be cultivated and 'engaged' in online advertising. As one of the first into the field able to argue that they had large and loyal audiences LG15 were very successful in attracting sponsorship through product placement by major brands eg Microsoft, Orange, Disney and Paramount, Kraft Foods, Procter and Gamble, and New Balance. On the basis of the *Kate Modern* experience in 2008 Bebo were offering sponsorship packages for their new series *Sofia's Diary* that broke down the value of their supposed audiences. Two major plotline integrations, a minimum of 2 Video inclusions per plotline and a minimum 20 product placements / mentions plus Branding across character profiles was on offer by Bebo at £425k for six months. For £100k a brand's media buyer could have bought bespoke integration consisting in 1 major plotline integration minimum of 2 Video inclusions and 2 product placements.

In the meantime at another level the success of Bebo was being discussed in online tech gossip, the idea that the company was worth £1bn began to circulate– (see eg <http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/05/20/is-bebo-worth-1-billion/>) In March 2008 it was sold for \$850m (£417m) to AOL – and its numbers have been in decline since. AOL announced their decision to seek a buyer or close it down in April 2010. Column inches, press attention and buzz here create economic value way beyond value of advertising to individual sponsors. In the process the production company LG15 were also able to leverage the attention, re-launching themselves as EQAL with a \$5m investment dedicated to promoting online brand engagement.



The very public process of monetising attention in their commissioned online web dramas attracted the attention of the global investment community. Upgrade buzz became an \$850m deal for Bebo's founders. The reality was more complex as Bebo's eventual demise was to prove – engagement was still hard to monetise compared to banners and logo flashes (see Lander 2010).

## **6 There is no 'outside'**

The creative, critical and applied methods at work in this essay create their own tensions that prevent easy conclusions. The critical perspectives on the attention economy offered for instance by Beller and others suggest compelling arguments that our identities are being colonised by the constant intensification of our work as 'audience commodity'. These processes come into focus when we examine how a demotic online form becomes drawn into professional media production. However in the context of creative and applied research methods, or from the point of view of the media producer wanting to take advantage of the transformed means of production and distribution made available by online this situation is not new. Media producers have always worked within an attention economy. There has never been 'an outside', where we could work without recourse to funding tied to attention. For producers the ethical choices of 'whose money will you take?' and 'at what price?' remain the same. Its just that there are many avenues between the 'everyday production of symbolic value', intrinsic value and economic value than ever before. Further research will explore how the methods of value co creation common to peer-to-peer networks, freemium or social gifting systems might offer radical reformulations of the attention economy in practice.

## **Bibliography**

Anderson, Chris (2006), *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, London: Hyperion.

Barabasi A-L & Bonabeau E 2003 'Scale Free Networks' *Scientific American* May 50-9,).

Beller J (2006) Paying Attention

<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/24/beller.php> (5.10.10)

Bourdieu Pierre (1986) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* London Routledge

Jean Burgess & Joshua Green (2009) *You Tube* Cambridge UK: Polity Press 2009

Carr Nicholas (2010) *The Shallows* Norton London & N.Y.

Davenport T & Beck J (2001) *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* Harvard Business School Press Accenture

Dovey Jon (2000) *Freakshow* Pluto Press London

Dovey J & Kennedy (2006) *HW Game Cultures – Computer Games as New Media* McGraw Hill Maidenhead.

Thomas Elsaesser 'Tales of Epiphany and Entropy: Around the Worlds in Eighty Clicks' in *The You Tube Reader* eds Pelle Snickers & Patrick Vondereau Stockholm: National Library of Sweden 2009

Goldhaber, M. H. (1997), "The Attention Economy and the Net", *First Monday*  
<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>

Internet Advertising Bureau (<http://www.iabuk.net/en/1/adspendgrows300909.mxs>) accessed 18.10.10

Johnson Bobbie (2009) *Does You Tube Actually Make Any Money*  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/blog/2009/apr/07/youtube-video-losses>

O'Reilly Tim 2005 What Is Web 2.0 Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software by <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>) 2005

Lander R *VonViral* <http://vonviral.ning.com/> (accessed 12.10.10)

Lander R 2010 *The Truth About Bebo* <http://vonviral.ning.com/profiles/blogs/web-funding-part-two-the-truth> 18.10.10

Lange, P. G. (2007). Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), article 18.  
<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/lange.html>

Lanham Richard (2006) *The Economics of Attention* University of Chicago Press Chicago

Simon, H. A. (1971), "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World", in Martin Greenberger, *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, ISBN 0-8018-1135-X.

Terranova Tiziana *The Bios of Attention* Unpublished Conference Paper 'Paying Attention' Linköping Sweden Sept 2010 (<http://payingattention.org/>)

### **Web Citations**

*My Sister Freaks Out* (2006) <http://www.youtube.com/user/MacKenzieheartsu>  
18.10.10

*Where Are the Joneses* (2007) <http://wherearethejoneses.wikidot.com/> 18.10.10

Hazel Grian (2009) *Traces of Hope* (<http://tracesofhope.com/>) 18.10.10

PIAS Mobile (2010) *Plastic Beach* <http://pias.com/mobile/?p=101>

Seeper (2010) Interactive Projection Mapping for Nokia Ovi Maps  
<http://vimeo.com/groups/1313/videos/11188067>